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SUBJECT: TURKISH ACADEMICS, STUDENTS COMMENT ON MIDDLE EAST POLICY, VIEWS OF AMERICA

1. (SBU) Summary. Media savvy academics and students involved in democracy building expressed mixed views to a visiting counter-terrorism team about America and its foreign policy in meetings earlier this month. One academic fretted over Turks, generally more negative opinion of the U.S. and felt there was not time for democracy to be built in the Middle East. Another, however, was certain the university population of Turkey sided with the U.S. on the need for democracy in the Middle East. Students told us that more exposure to average U.S. citizens would counteract misinformation and stereotypes of the U.S. held by many in Turkey. End summary.

DEMOCRACY? THERE ISN'T TIME

2. (SBU) Professor Ercan Citlioglu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahcesehir University and consultant to the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM), is troubled by U.S. regional policy and the damage done to the bilateral relations as a result of recriminations in Turkey's 2003 refusal to permit U.S. troops to open a northern front in Iraq. There is not enough time, he added, to develop democracy in the region, implying events would become unmanageable before democracy effectively shaped outcomes. In the broader Middle East, Citlioglu questioned whether people even want democracy. A popular view is that the U.S. pushes democracy as a vehicle to rule the area. Democracy would be possible only when people trust the United States; at the moment, negative suspicions abound. Trying to prove his point, Citlioglu cited the triumph of extremist Hamas in the Palestinian elections. Somewhat contradictorily, he added that they won not because of their political platform against U.S.-backed policy, but because of the practical results of their social and economic policies. He noted that the AK Party also came to power in Turkey on economic-based issues.

HOPE THROUGH IMPROVED LIVES

3. (SBU) Citlioglu said United States faces obstacles including perceptions that ulterior motives feed the U.S. push for democracy, and regional leaders' determination not to divest themselves of power -- a problem growing in intensity the farther east one travels into central Asia. Still, Citlioglu said people in the region nevertheless equated democracy with jobs and improving economic conditions and from that standpoint, there was hope for popular sentiment turning in democracy's favor.

4. (SBU) Turning to concern over current U.S.-Turkish relations, Citlioglu related a personal anecdote. Reputedly close to members of the Turkish General Staff, he had been in the company of a Turkish four-star general, still serving, when news of the Suleymaniye incident came through. The general had wept, he said. Citlioglu said that Turks would not forget nor forgive this incident.

YOUR MESSAGE ISN'T GETTING THROUGH

5. (SBU) Professor Deniz Ulke Aribogan, a sociologist at Istanbul's Bilgi University, who appears on news programs to provide expert commentary on terrorism, said that Turks see America as combating only one kind of terrorism, but that poverty and illness constitute another type of terrorism. Years ago, people hated the Soviet Union, but now conspiratorial rumors abound involving the United States, she said, citing one to the effect that Al-Qaida was a CIA creation to set the groundwork for U.S. intervention in the Middle East. She lamented the transformation of America's image, and hoped for an improved "marketing" strategy. Despite America's high negatives among the Turkish general public, Aribogan assured us university students were nonetheless with the United States in its drive to build democracy.

A REALIST IMPULSE

6. (SBU) Echoing Citlioglu, Aribogan favored an authoritarian approach to governing in the Middle East. Noting the U.S. had supported anti-democratic regimes for

years without apparent conflict, why now was the United States pushing democracy? She asserted many intellectuals were saying democracy was increasingly dangerous in the world. Among Muslims, the faithful are certain their understanding of Islam is correct and all others sinful. Long ago, disagreements regarding the nature of the faith were handled by the prince who enforced his interpretation of Islam within his territory. The break-up of that system led to the current chaos, and democracy only feeds the problem by enabling those with clashing views to compete head-to-head in a fierce battle. At a minimum, the United States as the current prince/protector should use its authority in Iraq to forbid obviously self-defeating actions such as the use of ethnic names in political parties.

#### YOUNG ANATOLIAN LEADERS PUSHING DEMOCRATIC REFORM

17. (SBU) We also met with members of the Young Anatolian Leaders, a group of Turkish university students interested in promoting civil society. The students' views ranged from left to right, and from secular to religious. Their enthusiasm in welcoming official Americans was evident. Asked about their views of U.S. policy toward Iraq and the region and about how they felt the United States could improve how it is perceived in Turkey, the group responded that they were already involved in promoting civil society in Northern Iraq. Last spring, the group's president had made a trip to Kirkuk to make contact with peers there regarding a proposal to open a student center. The plan is to offer movies, live music and other offerings as a means for bringing people together and to stimulate conversation and dialogue. The Young Anatolians have a vision for sponsoring similar projects in many countries of the region, including Cyprus, Israel, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Greece.

18. (SBU) Students said the Turkish perception of Americans in general and U.S. policy in particular was improving from a low point one year ago. These students were not buying the conspiracy theories about nor stereotypes of Americans. They said they felt Turks had much in common with Americans and wished for increased exchanges and visits by average Americans to promote knowledge of American values and society in Turkey, especially important and needed in Anatolia where people had little sense of what an American is like other than through often misleading media channels.

19. (SBU) Comment. While the academics expressed concern over public perceptions and opinions of the United States, they felt improving bilateral relations was in Turkey's interest. That current of basic goodwill and an instinctive appreciation for the U.S., reflected among the students we met, should prove useful as both sides make efforts to recover lost ground. End comment.

JONES